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THE STUDY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY AND ITS PLACE IN THE PROFESSIONAL CURRICULUM

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IN an extremely suggestive report of the Committee on Education of the American Institute of Architecture written by the late Mr. Henry Van Brunt, now some twenty years ago, he strongly urges on the profession and on the architectural schools the importance of the study of architectural history as a means of appreciating the fundamental principles which underlie design. He would "teach the whole course of history by the architecture which was a part of it" and would "pursue this study of history through its manifestations in architecture from archaic to modern times, or at least to the nineteenth century, not with the minute patient scrutiny of the archæologist, but with the spirit of the artist, seeking to learn how forms and ornaments were developed out of the genius of civilizations and peoples, and how, as they were significant of the progress of human culture in the past, they should be used in the service of modern art." He believed that this would lead to "practice, not with unreasoning prejudice in favor of this, that or the other forms of art, nor with the indifference of eclecticism, but with a sense of the deep significance of these forms to whatever era they belonged, as expressions of the history of our race, and with a conviction that decorative forms in historical architecture are not mere fashions or accidents of the times—but symbols slowly evolved by process of art from certain definite conditions of human life, as links in a continuous chain of evolution." A similar view is expressed by Mr. Russell Sturgis in the preface to his "European Architecture" when he says that if "archæological study has been unfavorable to the growth of natural and original design" it is "because the modern student of architecture, as an art to be practiced, has studied the superficial aspects of ancient styles rather than the essential nature of those styles." "It is to be urged as a remedy for the modern disease of borrowing and copying that the true nature of each favorite style of ancient art should be made more familiar to our practicing architects."

These views fairly well expressed the attitude of the more intelligent and thoughtful architects toward the study of architectural history and its value in the training of the practical architect: its study, namely, not for the purpose of being able to copy or follow with more or less accuracy the forms of this or that style, but for the purpose of really penetrating the underlying meaning of

architectural form. Mr. Van Brunt's report urged upon the schools a more thorough and penetrating study of architectural history.

Of late, however, these views have been questioned in influential quarters. It has been claimed by some that the close study of architectural history tended toward archæological revivalism, and the schools have been urged to spend more time directly upon architectural design, and to give less time to architectural history, which was valuable, to be sure, as general information (the architect ought to be familiar in a general way with the past of his art), but which, it is said, had little bearing on the practical pursuit of design as a living art. In the great times of art, it is urged, craftsmen and architects worked out the vital problems of their day in direct fashion, caring little for the work of bygone times and in general ignorant of their artistic past. The modern architect should attack his problems in the same way if he is to produce anything vital, and need concern himself little with the past.

One might at once urge that some of the worst solecisms of our time, some of the most flagrant misapplications of historic forms, are the work of those whose knowledge of the history of architectural development is the most superficial.

There is however a solid basis for this recent contention. The whole question will bear re-examination, to determine, if we may, what real place if any the study of architectural history has in professional training; and, if it has such a place, what the aims and methods of that study should be.

We are led at once, in taking up this question, to approach it from the historic side. The argument is: since the great art of the past has been produced without a comprehensive knowledge of its past, since it has developed always directly to meet the needs of its own time, on the basis of that which immediately preceded, why should the practical architect of today be burdened by the study of forms which he cannot and should not use, since they do not meet nor express the need of his time? Why is it not enough—why is it not better—that he should concentrate his study upon design and construction, concerning himself only with the forms of the present, not confusing himself with the endless and intricate variety of the forms of the past?

There can be no question that this has been the successful mode of approach. That in all past time until the Renaissance,—from some points of view we might almost say until the nineteenth century,—architecture has been the work of men dealing directly and freely with the needs of their time. Unconcerned with and for the most part entirely ignorant of any art but that of their own day, they have freely and spontaneously moulded the forms of their inherited past to meet the changing needs and ideas of their present. Imitation of other forms of art has indeed constantly modified, sometimes even greatly diverted the current of the development; but the motive has never been imitation, it has always been creation: to meet in what seemed the best way the practical or ideal need and to give to it the most beautiful expression of which the artist was capable in the terms of his familiar and inherited art. In this way and under this natural impulse the forms of art have developed organically. The changes have always been the spontaneous outgrowth of circumstances, and the ideals have always embraced the whole generation of artists in any given time and region. Never at any time did any question arise as to what style should be used, never at any time

was more than one style in use in any given region at any given period:—the style was always fixed, like the spoken language, in the tradition of the people, and like the language was gradually and insensibly modified to meet changing needs. So much was this the case that an old building however venerated could be added to only in the style of the time, whether it was a Greek temple like the Heræum at Olympia, or a Gothic church like the cathedral of Chartres. It is this fact that adds so much interest to the study of ancient buildings. The history of the time is built into the structure in a vital way.

It is of the essence of the matter to note also the methods by means of which this traditional art was carried on. The architect in the modern sense cannot be said to have existed. There was no such separation as exists today between designer and craftsman. If not absolutely the same, they had at least been through the same training, they had imbibed the same traditions, and worked side by side on the same buildings. The designer carried out the work as master builder in constant contact with the work itself as it grew under his hand.

The Renaissance changed all this. It substituted the imitative motive for that of spontaneous and constructive development. Its aim was to revive the glories of an admired past. The more nearly it could imitate, or thought it imitated, the work of Imperial Rome the more successful it regarded itself, and more and more it tended to copy certain aspects of the outward form merely and to produce an architecture of formulæ, of rote and rule, in place of one of spontaneous and vital growth. It produced great things; but its best work was done during the time when traditional methods still held sway, and the vital creative impulse was still strong enough to prevent the following of its aim of imitation with completeness. For the artist craftsman, the master builder, it gradually substituted the architect, the designer who made his compositions on paper which he turned over to others to execute under his general direction. Already in the fifteenth century the great scholar-architect Leon Battista Alberti maintained that it was beneath the dignity of the architect to carry out his own work. Since those days the artist craftsman has disappeared practically altogether, and the mechanic directed by the contractor has taken his place as workman, while the function of design is left to the architect alone.

The influence of the new motive—imitation rather than creation—led as we can now see almost inevitably to the architecture of formulæ which dominated the close of the eighteenth century and continued into the nineteenth. Less and less interesting the buildings became. Less and less expressive of individual character, the same formula was applied to buildings of all sorts. By the aid of these rules the amateur of taste often accomplished work as distinguished as that of the trained practitioner. One recalls their names: Sir John Vanbrugh the courtier and playwright, Lord Burlington, Thomas Jefferson. Indeed the best architects of this period, men like the physician Claude Perrault, Wren and Bulfinch, belonged to this class. We all know the pompous and formal and often ungainly vanities that resulted from the activities of lesser men.

It is not surprising that against this system of imitation, reduced to rule and applied with little discrimination to all sorts of problems, there was ultimately revolt, and that in sheer fatigue men turned for relief to other things. But tradition (except as expressed in these formulæ) was extinct, and perforce de-

signers turned from one source of imitation to another. First it was Greece, imitated in the new enthusiasm that followed its virtual rediscovery. The simply treated colonnade is always dignified: and it must be confessed that the imitated Greek colonnades were productive of a dignity we sometimes envy. The colonnades of gateways, guard houses, theaters, museums and palaces in Berlin or Munich, the colonnaded church fronts of a Hittorff or a "Greek Thomson," the British Museum, the treasury building in Washington, the custom house in Boston, the sub-treasury in New York are for the most part buildings we should be sorry now to lose. But imitated Greek colonnades were not more vital or expressive than imitated Roman ones. The buildings named, and others less successful, were expressive of their time chiefly in showing how completely that time was devoid of real artistic power. The impulse of these buildings was archæological rather than artistic, and practically these buildings were as little adapted to their various purposes as they were little expressive of them. The whole movement of the Greek revival was a mere fashion, with no historic basis in the countries that attempted it, and as such it had its day.

The Gothic revival, which in England partly accompanied partly followed it, was at least based on more hopeful motives. It recognized that the great art of the past had been based upon artistic tradition. Its fundamental motive was to revive the submerged artistic tradition of England, and it may be said to have had the same sort of justification as the Renaissance architecture of Italy. It is curious, perhaps significant, to note that about the same interval of time (approximately two hundred years) intervened, between the last flickerings of the classic impulse in Tuscany at the end of the twelfth century and the revival of the classic forms (partly based indeed on eleventh and twelfth century prototypes) in the beginning of the fifteenth, and the last Gothic, which in England lingered in mixed and impure forms until toward the close of the seventeenth century, and its revival in the nineteenth. Indeed the Gothic impulse never quite died out in England, any more than the classic impulse ever quite died out in Italy. But the revived classic forms in Italy in the fifteenth century had this advantage over the revival of the Gothic forms in England in the nineteenth century: at the time of the Renaissance, though the motive was that of imitation, the methods were those of tradition, the potent impulse of the revival was creative rather than archæological; in the Gothic revival in England the method was archæological, there was little freedom, little invention, each design down to its last moulding had to be archæologically correct according to the period imitated. Such a method persisted in could lead to no vital results, and like other fashions the Gothic fashion ceded the field to still others. It did not however quite die out. It was presently taken hold of in a more vital way. There was a remarkable, if partial, revival of the craftsmanship upon which the traditional art had depended. The Gothic revival accompanied and partly expressed a notable religious movement, and so it has come to pass that, in church work and domestic work in England, and to an extent in this country, a new Gothic which shows much of vital quality and interest has developed. Its interest and its aim is no longer archæological. It is inspired by the ancient Gothic art of England, but it uses the old forms freely and creates others from them to express new needs and new conditions. It has created in these two fields some of the most interest-

ing and some of the most promising work of modern times and, insofar as it has been successful, it has been enabled to do this by methods wholly modern, by a penetrating and exhaustive study of past art, which aims at the revival of principles rather than the copying of forms. Its occupation of the field is partial, and it seems that under our modern conditions several main artistic currents are likely to run side by side. Who can say whether they will ever coalesce so that from them will spring a single homogeneous art? Certainly they cannot, until our civilization itself changes its character and becomes simpler and more homogeneous.

In its endeavor to occupy the whole field, the Gothic revival in England was doomed to failure, even apart from the merely imitative and archæological motive which so long controlled its attempts. In England and in America imitation succeeded imitation. Every known historic style has been followed, in some cases with an ignorance nothing short of ludicrous.

Finally we have had—in the so called “art nouveau” and other similar attempts,—a recognition of the failure of the motive of imitation, of the inability of such a motive to produce any work which should have a really vital relation to its epoch. And so precedent has been thrown overboard altogether, and for the first time in the history of humanity we have seen great ability wasting itself in the impossible endeavor to invent a new style, to create out of nothing forms which should be expressive of our modern world. This, the most futile and ill-judged of all the artistic movements which in the field of architecture have followed each other in the last one hundred years, has produced in its various manifestations the most hideous monstrosities the world has ever seen: and yet this movement will prove to have had its value as a protest. It serves also to emphasize the condition of chaos which we have reached; but out of which there are not wanting signs that we shall struggle.

This brief survey of familiar facts seems necessary to our discussion in order to emphasize the utterly and radically different situation in which we find ourselves in architectural matters, as compared with all previous epochs. Our situation is unique. No such condition as that of the present has ever existed in the architectural world at any period. The imitative impulse which ultimately produced this condition was introduced by the Renaissance: but the Renaissance itself succeeded in establishing a quasi-tradition which did not exhaust itself until the close of the eighteenth century. Our situation differs from that of other epochs, not simply as one period has differed from another hitherto; but it differs utterly in kind from all other periods. So far as architectural development is concerned, the past up to the close of the eighteenth century stands on one side, and the nineteenth century up to the present stands on the other. A clear recognition of this difference seems essential to any fruitful discussion of the means to be adopted to secure an advance in architecture in the future, and this involves the question of the best methods to be pursued in the training of the architect. Never until the present has the world, or any part of it, found itself so completely without an architectural tradition as the Europe and America of today. Never until the present at any given time at any given place could any question arise as to what style should be used, as it almost necessarily arises with every building with us today, often dictating

the choice of this or that architect who is known to favor this or that historic style. Every one interested in the subject is agreed that some way out of this chaos must be sought. But if we are to find a way out it must be by a clear recognition of our condition as it exists.

The art of the past depended for its strength on inherited tradition. The tradition once lost, the continuity of development in a very real sense broken, we cannot out of hand re-create that lost tradition. We begin to differ at once as to the desirable starting point. We cannot, if we would, go back to the naïf indifference to and ignorance of the past which accompanied the great artistic epochs of former times. We cannot, if we would, escape the influence of all the art of the past which is brought to our doors and, as it were, thrust into our hands. Our choice lies simply between really knowing it and using it wisely in the fullness of knowledge, or knowing it only superficially and misusing and misapplying it ignorantly. It seems self-evident that since the whole position of architecture today differs radically from that of the past, our conditions demand a different training for the architect. It is neither possible nor desirable to revive for him the training of, for instance, the medieval craftsman-architect. The question seems to resolve itself into this: what can we substitute for our lost traditions? Or how can we go about the task of gradually building up such a tradition? How can we, in our present conditions, gradually create an atmosphere in which artistic development can flourish? It seems evident that it must be through making the most of these conditions, by drawing the utmost advantage from our vast accumulated knowledge of the past. We must seek to combine scholarship with artistic impulse and enthusiasm, must seek to give that impulse and enthusiasm the sure basis of knowledge. For the support which the architect of the past received from tradition, we must substitute scholarship. Not the scholarship which is concerned with facts merely, with archæological study of outward forms; but the scholarship concerned with principles, which studies the art of the great epochs of the past in order to understand if possible those fundamental qualities which made it great, which penetrates to the meaning of the forms used, which analyses and compares for the purpose of gaining inspiration, in order that it may create by following consciously the principles which are seen to have been followed unconsciously in the great art of the past, developing if possible by degrees a tradition out of what is best in all past form, because it understands what to take and what to modify in order to meet the conditions of the present. Such a scholarship, we may hope, will produce an art which will not, on the one hand, change a significant and established form merely for the sake of novelty; but which, on the other, will freely mould and shape form to meet more expressively new and changing conditions. All our schools of architecture recognize that practically, in spite of the revivals that have passed over us, we are still, so far as form-language is concerned, under the inevitable influence of the Renaissance. The teaching of design is founded, and wisely founded, on the study of the orders and the elements of simple classic form. There is a simplicity and directness in the best classic forms, as well as an excellence of proportion, which makes them, in connection with problems to which they properly apply, the best basis for the study of composition, and we are coming more and more clearly to recognize that these forms have an elasticity and an applicability which

makes them the best basis for such a tradition as we desire to create. While the study of the past and the experience of the present make it clear that there can be no forward progress, no development of anything worth while except on the basis of accepted and tried forms as a starting point, it is also becoming more and more clear that the student and the architect need something more than the mere knowledge of those forms as a basis for design. They need to understand them. They need to know their meaning in relation to structure and their connection with the needs and ideals that first gave them birth.

We do not need to go back to the results of the dry and mechanical application of the classic formulæ in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to see that a superficial knowledge of classic form leads to all sorts of hideous misapplication, to incongruities sometimes condoned by those who are content to note the correct following of certain types, but which are justly and pretty universally condemned even by non-professional critics of taste and judgment. Many of these faults and incongruities are due to the imitative motive introduced with the Renaissance, which inevitably led to the misuse of form; and if the contention of those critics who maintain that these incongruities are inherent in the Renaissance is not altogether justified, it at least makes clear that we need, especially in undertaking to apply these forms to the needs of our own day, to have our judgment and our taste guided and clarified by such sure knowledge of principle as can only come from a sound and thorough and painstaking study and analysis of the art of the past, and that if we are to base our forward progress on the precedents of the Renaissance those precedents, especially, need to be fully analysed if we are not to be utterly misled by them.

Do not these considerations make it clear that Mr. Russell Sturgis was wholly justified in his contention, that in so far as archæological study has been "unfavorable to the growth of natural and original design" it has been "because the modern student of architecture as an art to be practised, has studied the superficial aspects of ancient styles, rather than their essential nature"? And that he is right in urging, "as a remedy for the modern disease of borrowing and copying," a real familiarity with the true nature of the styles, and he might have added the true nature of style? It is another instance of the truth of the adage: "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, drink deep or taste not the Pierian Spring." And yet it becomes also clear that it is not so much more study, as the right kind of study of architectural history which is needed. The right kind of study of architectural history will make it clear to the student, that the great architecture of the past has always developed in obedience to certain great principles which underlie the best work of all the styles; it will make clear to him that great architecture has always been produced as an expression of the needs of its own time, that form has developed as an expression of structure and through the working out by architects and craftsmen of the problems of their own day in direct fashion. He will learn to appreciate that form is significant only when so used, and that a living art can only be developed by working in this simple and straightforward manner. He will see that great design has always been produced by the frank treatment of each problem as it arises, that it has been produced by meeting first of all in the fullest way the practical conditions, and then by giving to the practical solution of the problem harmo-

nious and beautiful arrangement, the design developing from within outward, the exterior form becoming the development and beautiful expression of the interior organism. As his studies go on he will appreciate more and more that only in such organic fashion can the best design be produced. The more he appreciates the significant beauty of the Greek temple, of the order of the Parthenon or of the Erechtheum, the more he will desire to apply the same directness of design, the same sensitive beauty of proportion and of form to his own work, and the less disposed he will be merely to copy the forms of the Greek orders. The more sensitive he becomes to the essential beauty of these forms and the more he realizes how these forms were produced, the more he will strive to work in the spirit of the old designers and the more repugnant it will be to him slavishly to copy what they have done. He will begin to realize in his own work the meaning of the saying "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." Incidentally in this study of the past the student will be forming his taste by the intimate study of the finest things of all time. The formation of taste is clearly one of the most important tasks which the schools of architecture have to set themselves. If this is the object of the study of architectural history it becomes very clear that this object is not in any degree to enable the student to copy this or that form. It is not to be pursued with the object of enabling him to make tombs or banks like Greek temples, nor to build thirteenth century Gothic churches, nor to design salons in the style of this or that Louis. The study of the history of architectural development rightly pursued will serve, as Mr. Sturgis pointed out, as a preventive rather than as an encouragement to this sort of thing. Its purpose, for students of the practical art of architecture in our day, should be, that fundamental principles of design may be deduced and appreciated, that the essential conditions which produce great art may if possible to some extent be known, that the meaning of architectural form may be understood. Its purpose should be to show how these forms developed as the ideal embodiment of constructive principles, and as the expression of the civilizations that produced them. Such a study, it is clear, can be no superficial study. The forms must be thoroughly known if they are to be understood; and properly carried out this study in itself is a stimulus to the imagination, and should be a help in the practical study of design which must always occupy the dominant place in any well balanced architectural curriculum. The history of each period must be so far studied as to make clear the conditions under which and as an expression of which the forms came into being, so that the study of architectural history becomes the study of the history of civilization as expressed in architecture. Such a study, under the conditions that exist today, is essential to those architects who would be in any real sense leaders in their profession, who are ambitious to guide their art onward to higher things. Only by means of such a study can a clear realization of the underlying principles of the fine art of architecture be had, only by such a study of the conditions of success in the past shall we be enabled to see clearly the conditions of success in the future, only by the conscious application of principles thus appreciated can we hope to build again a vital artistic tradition, which will grow out of the present, but which will be firmly based on a full knowledge of the significance of the forms of the past.